

# GORDO

**Medium:** Newspaper comics

**Distributed by:** United Feature Syndicate

**First Appeared:** 1941

**Creator:** Gus Arriola

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The *Gordo* comic strip was founded in stereotypes. The title character was a Mexican bean farmer who spoke broken English and liked to siesta all day. The [cartoonist](#), ...

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... Gus Arriola, tho his parents were born in Mexico, never even visited that country until the strip had been running more than a decade. But *Gordo* hadn't been in print long before praise started coming in from diplomats, prominent educators, Mexican government officials and the like, for its effectiveness in promoting friendship and understanding between global neighbors.

Arriola got his start in pro cartooning at the Charles Mintz Studio, where, starting in 1936, he was an [in-betweener](#) on such characters as [Barney Google](#), [Scrappy](#) and [Krazy Kat](#). A year later, he moved to [MGM](#), where he worked on a one-shot character called The Lonesome Stranger. He took one of the Mexican bandits from that cartoon, cleaned him up, dropped the barrel chest down to his gut, and named him Perfecto Salazar "Gordo" Lopez. Gordo's strip made the rounds of syndicates and wound up at United Feature, where the reigning superstars were [Li'l Abner](#) and [Nancy](#). *Gordo* began daily syndication on November 24, 1941.

The strip was only a couple of weeks old when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, and the country was suddenly at war. After less than a year, *Gordo* went on hiatus while Arriola served in the U.S. military. His duties (working on training films) left him with evenings and weekends free, so he started a Sunday version in 1943. The daily resumed publication in 1946.

Besides Gordo (an approximate English translation of which would be "Fatso"), major characters from the early days of the strip include Pepito (his young nephew, who thought Onkel Gordo was "the mos' bes' bean farmer of the whole world"), Paris Juarez Keats Garcia (aka The Poet, Gordo's best friend), Artemisa Rosalinda Gonzalez (a middle-aged widow whose major

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goal in life was to marry Gordo, to Gordo's horror), Senor Dog (a chihuahua who shared Gordo's home), and several miscellaneous animals (who also shared Gordo's home). (Like the babies in [Sugar & Spike](#), Gordo's animals could speak with one another but not with humans.)

Much of the early characterization was based on stereotypes — partly because that's an understandable shortcut when introducing an audience of one culture to characters from another, but mainly, Arriola later explained, because that was simply the way things were done at the time, and it took a little while for him to realize it didn't have to be that way. As his characters developed, they became richer and more fully rounded, and Arriola felt less need to saddle them with dialect and stylized behavior. Eventually, Gordo even started wearing American-style clothes — sometimes, at least.

At all stages of their development, tho, the characters were treated as respectable, silly, capable, fallible and funny — human beings, in short. And through them, Americans, quite a few of whom lived where you could go years without hearing Spanish spoken on the street, were exposed to the everyday lives of ordinary folks in Mexico. Without *Gordo* to introduce the words in many areas, tortillas, tamales and burritos might not be quite so popular in English-speaking America today.

*Gordo* never lost its basic Mexican-ness, tho it did become somewhat diluted in later years, by characters who came from the U.S. In fact, The Poet wound up marrying one. More prominent, tho, was Mary Frances Sevier (named after Arriola's wife, incidentally), a multi-millionaire with a thick Southern accent, who was about Pepito's age. (They grew up together, and eventually became romantically involved.) But an even more important character, who joined the cast after them, was Mexican — Gordo's housekeeper, Tehuana Mama, a formidable woman of mature years, whose lap was a regular hanging-out place for the household animals. Tho she didn't wear his ring, and tho he continued having brief romantic flings, Tehuana Mama was clearly the woman in Gordo's life.

Yet another important character was neither Mexican nor American. In 1947, Gordo acquired an ancient bus called La Cometa Halley (Halley's Comet), which had a personality of its own. Some have even compared it to [The Toonerville Trolley](#) as one of comics' great classic vehicles. A year later, he took La Cometa off its gasoline diet, and introduced it to "grapejuice" (which readers understood to mean alcoholic beverages).

It's a good thing he had La Cometa Halley, because in 1954, Gordo was laid off by his landlord, Don Ramon del Monte, who could no longer afford to let his land be used to grow beans. By 1958, Gordo was using La Cometa as a tour bus, and earning his living showing Mexico off to interested Americans (which, in a sense, he'd been doing all along). This required him to learn more than he imagined there was to know of the history and varying peoples of Mexico — and required Arriola to do the same. It was then that *Gordo* **really** took off as a showcase for Mexico's rich cultural heritage.

*Gordo* was a fairly well-circulated strip, running for years in about 250-300 newspapers. It only appeared in two book reprints, one from Doubleday in 1950 and a full-color collection of Sundays in '89, and was never (despite a couple of options) made into a movie. It was never the subject of an entire

comic book, but was reprinted in the back pages of *Tip Top Comics*, along with [Abbie & Slats](#), [Peanuts](#), [Ferd'nand](#) and other United Feature strips. A reasonably successful comic, tho not a spectacular one. But it did win quite a few awards, including Parade of Nations, Inc. naming Arriola its Citizen of the Year. He received The National Cartoonists' Society's certificate for Best Humor Strip in 1957 (the first year it was given) and again in '65. In 2000, comics historian and scholar Robert C. Harvey collaborated with Arriola on *Accidental Ambassador Gordo*, a combination biography/strip overview (tho it isn't exactly clear whether that's a media spin-off or an award).

In the strip's very early years, Arriola employed an assistant, Lee Hooper. But from the late 1940s on, he handled the entire job by himself. The only exception was a single month in the mid-1950s, when a doctor ordered bed rest for Arriola, and his friends and neighbors (including Eldon Dedini, whose lushly painted cartoons were familiar to readers of *Esquire* and *Playboy*, and Hank Ketcham, creator of [Dennis the Menace](#)) filled in. Other than that, Arriola's solo performance went on for decades, a remarkable achievement, ending only when the cartoonist retired and folded the strip.

As *Gordo* approached its conclusion (March 2, 1985), its passing was recognized by two significant events, one in the real world and the other in the strip. In the real world, California's state legislature voted a resolution commending Arriola's professional excellence and thanking him for his many years of promoting inter-ethnic understanding through entertainment.

And in the strip, Gordo, in a last-ditch effort to escape the clutches of the Widow Gonzalez, finally married Tehuana Mama.

— DDM

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